CHAPTER VI

UNCLE CHRIS BANGS THE TABLE

I

A taxi-cab stopped at the door of Number Twenty-two, Ovingdon Square. Freddie Rooke emerged, followed by Jill. While Freddie paid the driver, Jill sniffed the afternoon air happily. It had turned into a delightful day. A westerly breeze, springing up in the morning, had sent the thermometer up with a run and broken the cold spell which had been gripping London. It was one of those afternoons which intrude on the bleakness of winter with a false but none the less agreeable intimation that Spring is on its way. The sidewalks were wet underfoot, and the gutters ran with thawed snow. The sun shone exhilaratingly from a sky the colour of a hedge-sparrow's egg.

"Doesn't everything smell lovely, Freddie," said Jill, "after our prison-life!"

"Topping!"

"Fancy getting out so quickly! Whenever I'm arrested, I must always make a point of having a rich man with me. I shall never tease you about that fifty-pound note again."

"Fifty-pound note?"

"It certainly came in handy to-day!"

She was opening the door with her latch-key, and missed the sudden sagging of Freddie's jaw, the sudden clutch at his breast-pocket, and the look of horror and anguish that started into his eyes. Freddie was appalled. Finding himself at the police-station penniless with the exception of a little loose change, he had sent that message to Derek, imploring assistance, as the only alternative to spending the night in a cell, with Jill in another. He had realized that there was a risk of Derek taking the matter hardly, and he had not wanted to get Jill into trouble, but there seemed nothing else to do. If they remained where they were overnight, the thing would get into the papers, and that would be a thousand times worse. And if he applied for aid to Ronny Devereux or Algy Martyn or anybody like that all London would know about it next day. So Freddie, with misgivings, had sent the message to Derek, and now Jill's words had reminded him that there was no need to have done so. Years ago he had read somewhere or heard somewhere about some chappie who always buzzed around with a sizable banknote stitched into his clothes, and the scheme had seemed to him ripe to a degree. You never knew when you might find yourself short of cash and faced by an immediate call for the ready. He had followed the chappie's example. And now, when the crisis had arrived, he had forgotten--absolutely forgotten!--that he had the dashed thing on his

person at all.

He followed Jill into the house, groaning in spirit, but thankful that she had taken it for granted that he had secured their release in the manner indicated. He did not propose to disillusion her. It would be time enough to take the blame when the blame came along. Probably old Derek would simply be amused and laugh at the whole bally affair like a sportsman. Freddie cheered up considerably at the thought.

Jill was talking to the parlourmaid whose head had popped up over the banisters flanking the stairs that led to the kitchen.

"Major Selby hasn't arrived yet, miss."

"That's odd. I suppose he must have taken a later train."

"There's a lady in the drawing-room, miss, waiting to see him. She didn't give any name. She said she would wait till the major came. She's been waiting a goodish while."

"All right, Jane. Thanks. Will you bring up tea?"

They walked down the hall. The drawing-room was on the ground floor, a long, dim room that would have looked like a converted studio but for the absence of bright light. A girl was sitting at the far end by the fireplace. She rose as they entered.

"How do you do?" said Jill. "I'm afraid my uncle has not come back yet...."

"Say!" cried the visitor. "You did get out quick!"

Jill was surprised. She had no recollection of ever having seen the other before. Her visitor was a rather pretty girl, with a sort of jaunty way of carrying herself which made a piquant contrast to her tired eyes and wistful face. Jill took an immediate liking to her. She looked so forlorn and pathetic.

"My name's Nelly Bryant," said the girl. "That parrot belongs to me."

"Oh, I see."

"I heard you say to the cop that you lived here, so I came along to tell your folks what had happened, so that they could do something. The maid said that your uncle was expected any minute, so I waited."

"That was awfully good of you."

"Dashed good," said Freddie.

"Oh, no! Honest, I don't know how to thank you for what you did. You don't know what a pal Bill is to me. It would have broken me all up if

that plug-ugly had killed him."

"But what a shame you had to wait so long."

"I liked it."

Nelly Bryant looked about the room wistfully. This was the sort of room she sometimes dreamed about. She loved its subdued light and the pulpy cushions on the sofa.

"You'll have some tea before you go, won't you?" said Jill, switching on the lights.

"It's very kind of you."

"Why, hullo!" said Freddie. "By Jove! I say! We've met before, what?"

"Why, so we have!"

"That lunch at Oddy's that young Threepwood gave, what?"

"I wonder you remember."

"Oh, I remember. Quite a time ago, eh? Miss Bryant was in that show. 'Follow the Girl,' Jill, at the Regal."

"Oh, yes. I remember you took me to see it."

"Dashed odd meeting again like this!" said Freddie. "Really rummy!"

Jane, the parlourmaid, entering with tea, interrupted his comments.

"You're American, then?" said Jill interested. "The whole company came from New York, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"I'm half American myself, you know. I used to live in New York when I was very small, but I've almost forgotten what it was like. I remember a sort of overhead railway that made an awful noise...."

"The Elevated!" murmured Nelly devoutly. A wave of home-sickness seemed to choke her for a moment.

"And the air. Like champagne. And a very blue sky."

"Yes," said Nelly in a small voice.

"I shouldn't half mind popping over New York for a bit," said Freddie, unconscious of the agony he was inflicting. "I've met some very sound sportsmen who came from there. You don't know a fellow named Williamson, do you?"

"I don't believe I do."

"Or Oakes?"

"No."

"That's rummy! Oakes has lived in New York for years."

"So have about seven million other people," interposed Jill. "Don't be silly, Freddie. How would you like somebody to ask of you if you knew a man named Jenkins in London?"

"I do know a man named Jenkins in London," replied Freddie triumphantly.

Jill poured out a cup of tea for her visitor, and looked at the clock.

"I wonder where Uncle Chris has got to," she said. "He ought to be here by now. I hope he hasn't got into any mischief among the wild stockbrokers down at Brighton."

Freddie laid down his cup on the table and uttered a loud snort.

"Oh, Freddie, darling!" said Jill remorsefully. "I forgot!
Stockbrokers are a painful subject, aren't they!" She turned to Nelly.

"There's been an awful slump on the Stock Exchange to-day, and he got--what was the word, Freddie?"

"Nipped!" said Freddie with gloom.

"Nipped!"

"Nipped like the dickens!"

"Nipped like the dickens!" Jill smiled at Nelly. "He had forgotten all about it in the excitement of being a jailbird, and I went and reminded him."

Freddie sought sympathy from Nelly.

"A silly ass at the club named Jimmy Monroe told me to take a flutter in some rotten thing called Amalgamated Dyes. You know how it is, when you're feeling devilish fit and cheery and all that after dinner, and somebody sidles up to you and slips his little hand in yours and tells you to do some fool thing. You're so dashed happy you simply say 'Right-ho, old bird! Make it so!' That's the way I got had!"

Jill laughed unfeelingly.

"It will do you good, Freddie. It'll stir you up and prevent you being so silly again. Besides, you know you'll hardly notice it. You've much

too much money as it is."

"It's not the money. It's the principle of the thing. I hate looking a frightful chump."

"Well, you needn't tell anybody. We'll keep it a secret. In fact, we'll start at once, for I hear Uncle Chris outside. Let us dissemble. We are observed!... Hullo, Uncle Chris!"

She ran down the room, as the door opened, and kissed the tall, soldierly man who entered.

"Well, Jill, my dear."

"How late you are. I was expecting you hours ago."

"I had to call on my broker."

"Hush! Hush!"

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing.... We've got visitors. You know Freddie Rooke, of course?"

"How are you, Freddie, my boy?"

"Cheerio!" said Freddie. "Pretty fit?"

"And Miss Bryant," said Jill.

"How do you do?" said Uncle Chris in the bluff, genial way which, in his younger days, had charmed many a five-pound note out of the pockets of his fellow-men and many a soft glance out of the eyes of their sisters, their cousins, and their aunts.

"Come and have some tea," said Jill. "You're just in time."

"Tea? Capital!"

Nelly had subsided shyly into the depths of her big arm-chair. Somehow she felt a better and a more important girl since Uncle Chris had addressed her. Most people felt like that after encountering Jill's Uncle Christopher. Uncle Chris had a manner. It was not precisely condescending, and yet it was not the manner of an equal. He treated you as an equal, true, but all the time you were conscious of the fact that it was extraordinarily good of him to do so. Uncle Chris affected the rank and file of his fellow-men much as a genial knight of the Middle Ages would have affected a scurvy knave or varlet if he had cast aside social distinctions for a while and hobnobbed with the latter in a tavern. He never patronized, but the mere fact that he abstained from patronizing seemed somehow impressive.

To this impressiveness his appearance contributed largely. He was a fine, upstanding man, who looked less than his forty-nine years in spite of an ominous thinning of the hair which he tended and brushed so carefully. He had a firm chin, a mouth that smiled often and pleasantly beneath the closely-clipped moustache, and very bright blue eyes which met yours in a clear, frank, honest gaze. Though he had served in his youth in India, he had none of the Anglo-Indian's sun-scorched sallowness. His complexion was fresh and sanguine. He looked as if he had just stepped out of a cold tub--a misleading impression, for Uncle Chris detested cold water and always took his morning bath as hot as he could get it.

It was his clothes, however, which, even more than his appearance, fascinated the populace. There is only one tailor in London, as distinguished from the ambitious mechanics who make coats and trousers, and Uncle Chris was his best customer. Similarly, London is full of young fellows trying to get along by the manufacture of foot-wear, but there is only one boot-maker in the true meaning of the word--the one who supplied Uncle Chris. And, as for hats, while it is no doubt a fact that you can get at plenty of London shops some sort of covering for your head which will keep it warm, the only hatter--using the term in its deeper sense--is the man who enjoyed the patronage of Major Christopher Selby. From foot to head, in short, from furthest South to extremest North, Uncle Chris was perfect. He was an ornament to his surroundings. The Metropolis looked better for

him. One seems to picture London as a mother with a horde of untidy children, children with made-up ties, children with wrinkled coats and baggy trouser-legs, sighing to herself as she beheld them, then cheering up and murmuring with a touch of restored complacency, "Ah, well, I still have Uncle Chris!"

"Miss Bryant is American, Uncle Chris," said Jill.

Uncle Chris spread his shapely legs before the fire, and glanced down kindly at Nelly.

"Indeed?" He took a cup of tea and stirred it. "I was in America as a young man."

"Whereabouts?" asked Nelly eagerly.

"Oh, here and there and everywhere. I travelled considerably."

"That's how it is with me," said Nelly, overcoming her diffidence as she warmed to the favourite topic. "I guess I know most every town in every State, from New York to the last one-night stand. It's a great old country, isn't it?"

"It is!" said Uncle Chris. "I shall be returning there very shortly." He paused meditatively. "Very shortly indeed."

Nelly bit her lip. It seemed to be her fate to-day to meet people who were going to America.

"When did you decide to do that?" asked Jill.

She had been looking at him, puzzled. Years of association with Uncle Chris had enabled her to read his moods quickly, and she was sure that there was something on his mind. It was not likely that the others had noticed it, for his manner was as genial and urbane as ever. But something about him, a look in his eyes that came and went, an occasional quick twitching of his mouth, told her that all was not well. She was a little troubled, but not greatly. Uncle Chris was not the sort of man to whom grave tragedies happened. It was probably some mere trifle which she could smooth out for him in five minutes, once they were alone together. She reached out and patted his sleeve affectionately. She was fonder of Uncle Chris than of anyone in the world except Derek.

"The thought," said Uncle Chris, "came to me this morning, as I read my morning paper while breakfasting. It has grown and developed during the day. At this moment you might almost call it an obsession. I am very fond of America. I spent several happy years there. On that occasion I set sail for the land of promise, I admit, somewhat reluctantly. Of my own free will I might never have made the expedition. But the general sentiment seemed so strongly in favour of my doing so that I yielded to what I might call a public demand. The

willing hands for my nearest and dearest were behind me, pushing, and I did not resist them. I have never regretted it. America is a part of every young man's education. You ought to go there, Freddie."

"Rummily enough," said Freddie, "I was saying just before you came in that I had half a mind to pop over. Only it's rather a bally fag, starting. Getting your luggage packed and all that sort of thing."

Nelly, whose luggage consisted of one small trunk, heaved a silent sigh. Mingling with the idle rich carried its penalties.

"America," said Uncle Chris, "taught me poker, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful. Also an exotic pastime styled Craps--or, alternatively, 'rolling the bones'--which in those days was a very present help in time of trouble. At Craps, I fear, my hand in late years has lost much of its cunning. I have had little opportunity of practising. But as a young man I was no mean exponent of the art. Let me see," said Uncle Chris meditatively. "What was the precise ritual? Ah! I have it, 'Come, little seven!'"

"'Come, eleven!'" exclaimed Nelly excitedly.

"'Baby....' I feel convinced that in some manner the word baby entered into it."

"'Baby needs new shoes!'"

"'Baby needs new shoes!' Precisely!"

"It sounds to me," said Freddie, "dashed silly."

"Oh, no!" cried Nelly reproachfully.

"Well, what I mean is, there's no sense in it, don't you know."

"It is a noble pursuit," said Uncle Chris firmly. "Worthy of the great nation that has produced it. No doubt, when I return to America, I shall have opportunities of recovering my lost skill."

"You aren't returning to America," said Jill. "You're going to stay safe at home like a good little uncle. I'm not going to have you running wild all over the world at your age."

"Age?" declaimed Uncle Chris. "What is my age? At the present moment I feel in the neighbourhood of twenty-one, and Ambition is tapping me on the shoulder and whispering 'Young man, go West!' The years are slipping away from me, my dear Jill--slipping so quickly that in a few minutes you will be wondering why my nurse does not come to fetch me. The wanderlust is upon me. I gaze around me at all this prosperity in which I am lapped," said Uncle Chris, eyeing the arm-chair severely, "all this comfort and luxury which swaddles me, and I feel staggered. I want activity. I want to be braced!"

"You would hate it," said Jill composedly. "You know you're the laziest old darling in the world."

"Exactly what I am endeavouring to point out. I am lazy. Or, I was till this morning."

"Something very extraordinary must have happened this morning. I can see that."

"I wallowed in gross comfort. I was what Shakespeare calls a 'fat and greasy citizen'!"

"Please, Uncle Chris!" protested Jill. "Not while I'm eating buttered toast!"

"But now I am myself again."

"That's splendid."

"I have heard the beat of the off-shore wind," chanted Uncle Chris, "and the thresh of the deep-sea rain. I have heard the song--How long! how long! Pull out on the trail again!"

"He can also recite 'Gunga Din,'" said Jill to Nelly. "I really must apologize for all this. He's usually as good as gold."

"I believe I know how he feels," said Nelly softly.

"Of course you do. You and I, Miss Bryant, are of the gipsies of the world. We are not vegetables like young Rooke here."

"Eh, what?" said the vegetable, waking from a reverie. He had been watching Nelly's face. Its wistfulness attracted him.

"We are only happy," proceeded Uncle Chris, "when we are wandering."

"You should see Uncle Chris wander to his club in the morning," said Jill. "He trudges off in a taxi, singing wild gipsy songs, absolutely defying fatigue."

"That," said Uncle Chris, "is a perfectly justified slur. I shudder at the depths to which prosperity has caused me to sink." He expanded his chest. "I shall be a different man in America. America would make a different man of you, Freddie."

"I'm all right, thanks!" said that easily satisfied young man.

Uncle Chris turned to Nelly, pointing dramatically.

"Young woman, go West! Return to your bracing home, and leave this enervating London! You...."

Nelly got up abruptly. She could endure no more.

"I believe I'll have to be going now," she said. "Bill misses me if I'm away long. Good-bye. Thank you ever so much for what you did."

"It was awfully kind of you to come round," said Jill.

"Good-bye, Major Selby."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Rooke."

Freddie awoke from another reverie.

"Eh? Oh, I say, half a jiffy. I think I may as well be toddling along myself. About time I was getting back to dress for dinner and all that. See you home, may I, and then I'll get a taxi at Victoria. Toodle-oo, everybody."

* * * * *

Freddie escorted Nelly through the hall and opened the front door for her. The night was cool and cloudy and there was still in the air that odd, rejuvenating suggestion of Spring. A wet fragrance came from the

dripping trees.

"Topping evening!" said Freddie conversationally.

"Yes."

They walked through the square in silence. Freddie shot an appreciative glance at his companion. Freddie, as he would have admitted frankly, was not much of a lad for the modern girl. The modern girl, he considered, was too dashed rowdy and exuberant for a chappie of peaceful tastes. Now, this girl, on the other hand, had all the earmarks of being something of a topper. She had a soft voice. Rummy accent and all that, but nevertheless a soft and pleasing voice. She was mild and unaggressive, and these were qualities which Freddie esteemed. Freddie, though this was a thing he would not have admitted, was afraid of girls, the sort of girls he had to take down to dinner and dance with and so forth. They were too dashed clever, and always seemed to be waiting for a chance to score off a fellow. This one was not like that. Not a bit. She was gentle and quiet and what not.

It was at this point that it came home to him how remarkably quiet she was. She had not said a word for the last five minutes. He was just about to break the silence, when, as they passed under a street lamp, he perceived that she was crying--crying very softly to herself, like a child in the dark.

"Good God!" said Freddie appalled. There were two things in life with which he felt totally unable to cope--crying girls and dog-fights. The glimpse he had caught of Nelly's face froze him into a speechlessness which lasted until they reached Daubeny Street and stopped at her door.

"Good-bye," said Nelly.

"Good-bye-ee!" said Freddie mechanically. "That's to say, I mean to say, half a second!" he added quickly. He faced her nervously, with one hand on the grimy railings. This wanted looking into. When it came to girls trickling to and fro in the public streets, weeping, well, it was pretty rotten and something had to be done about it. "What's up?" he demanded.

"It's nothing. Good-bye."

"But, my dear old soul," said Freddie, clutching the railing for moral support, "it is something. It must be! You might not think it, to look at me, but I'm really rather a dashed shrewd chap, and I can see there's something up. Why not give me the jolly old scenario and see if we can't do something?"

Nelly moved as if to turn to the door, then stopped. She was thoroughly ashamed of herself.

"I'm a fool!"

"No, no!"

"Yes, I am. I don't often act this way, but, oh, gee! hearing you all talking like that about going to America, just as if it was the easiest thing in the world, only you couldn't be bothered to do it, kind of got me going. And to think I could be there right now if I wasn't a bonehead!"

"A bonehead?"

"A simp. I'm all right as far up as the string of near-pearls, but above that I'm reinforced concrete."

Freddie groped for her meaning.

"Do you mean you've made a bloomer of some kind?"

"I pulled the worst kind of bone. I stopped on in London when the rest of the company went back home, and now I've got to stick."

"Rush of jolly old professional engagements, what?"

Nelly laughed bitterly.

"You're a bad guesser. No, they haven't started to fight over me yet. I'm at liberty, as they say in the Era."

"But, my dear old thing," said Freddie earnestly, "if you've nothing to keep you in England, why not pop back to America? I mean to say, home-sickness is the most dashed blighted thing in the world. There's nothing gives one the pip to such an extent. Why, dash it, I remember staying with an old aunt of mine up in Scotland the year before last and not being able to get away for three weeks or so, and I raved--absolutely gibbered--for the sight of the merry old metrop. Sometimes I'd wake up in the night, thinking I was back at the Albany, and, by Jove, when I found I wasn't I howled like a dog! You take my tip, old soul, and pop back on the next boat."

"Which line?"

"How do you mean, which line? Oh, I see, you mean which line? Well ... well ... I've never been on any of them, so it's rather hard to say. But I hear the Cunard well spoken of, and then again some chappies swear by the White Star. But I should imagine you can't go far wrong, whichever you pick. They're all pretty ripe, I fancy."

"Which of them is giving free trips? That's the point."

"Eh? Oh!" Her meaning dawned upon Freddie. He regarded her with deep consternation. Life had treated him so kindly that he had almost

forgotten that there existed a class which had not as much money as himself. Sympathy welled up beneath his perfectly fitting waistcoat. It was a purely disinterested sympathy. The fact that Nelly was a girl and in many respects a dashed pretty girl did not affect him. What mattered was that she was hard up. The thought hurt Freddie like a blow. He hated the idea of anyone being hard up.

"I say!" he said. "Are you broke?"

Nelly laughed.

"Am I? If dollars were doughnuts, I wouldn't even have the hole in the middle."

Freddie was stirred to his depths. Except for the beggars in the streets, to whom he gave shillings, he had not met anyone for years who had not plenty of money. He had friends at his clubs who frequently claimed to be unable to lay their hands on a bally penny, but the bally penny they wanted to lay their hands on generally turned out to be a couple of thousand pounds for a new car.

"Good God!" he said.

There was a pause. Then, with a sudden impulse, he began to fumble in his breast-pocket. Rummy how things worked out for the best, however scaly they might seem at the moment. Only an hour or so ago he had

been kicking himself for not having remembered that fifty-pound note, tacked on to the lining of his coat, when it would have come in handy at the police-station. He now saw that Providence had had the matter well in hand. If he had remembered it and coughed it up to the constabulary then, he wouldn't have had it now. And he needed it now. A mood of quixotic generosity had surged upon him. With swift fingers he jerked the note free from its moorings and displayed it like a conjurer exhibiting a rabbit.

"My dear old thing," he said, "I can't stand it! I absolutely cannot stick it at any price! I really must insist on your trousering this. Positively!"

Nelly Bryant gazed at the note with wide eyes. She was stunned. She took it limply, and looked at it under the dim light of the gas-lamp over the door.

"I couldn't!" she cried.

"Oh, but really! You must!"

"But this is a fifty-pound!"

"Absolutely! It will take you back to New York, what? you asked which line was giving free trips. The Freddie Rooke Line, by Jove, sailings every Wednesday and Saturday! I mean, what?"

"But I can't take two hundred and fifty dollars from you!"

"Oh, rather. Of course you can."

There was another pause.

"You'll think--" Nelly's pale face flushed. "You'll think I told you all about myself just--just because I wanted to...."

"To make a touch? Absolutely not! Rid yourself of the jolly old supposition entirely. You see before you, old thing, a chappie who knows more about borrowing money than any man in London. I mean to say, I've had my ear bitten more often than anyone, I should think. There are sixty-four ways of making a touch--I've had them all worked on me by divers blighters here and there--and I can tell any of them with my eyes shut. I know you weren't dreaming of any such thing."

The note crackled musically in Nelly's hand.

"I don't know what to say!"

"That's all right."

"I don't see why.... Gee! I wish I could tell you what I think of you!"

Freddie laughed amusedly.

"Do you know," he said, "that's exactly what the beaks--the masters, you know--used to say to me at school."

"Are you sure you can spare it?"

"Oh, rather."

Nelly's eyes shone in the light of the lamp.

"I've never met anyone like you before. I don't know how...."

Freddie shuffled nervously. Being thanked always made him feel pretty rotten.

"Well, I think I'll be popping," he said. "Got to get back and dress and all that. Awfully glad to have seen you, and all that sort of rot."

Nelly unlocked the door with her latch-key, and stood on the step.

"I'll buy a fur-wrap," she said, half to herself.

"Great wheeze! I should!"

"And some nuts for Bill!"

"Bill?"

"The parrot."

"Oh, the jolly old parrot! Rather! Well, cheerio!"

"Good-bye.... You've been awfully good to me."

"Oh, no," said Freddie uncomfortably. "Any time you're passing...."

"Awfully good.... Well, good-bye."

"Toodle-oo!"

"Maybe we'll meet again some day."

"I hope so. Absolutely!"

There was a little scurry of feet. Something warm and soft pressed for an instant against Freddie's cheek, and, as he stumbled back, Nelly Bryant skipped up the steps and vanished through the door.

"Good God!"

Freddie felt his cheek. He was aware of an odd mixture of embarrassment and exhilaration.

From the area below a slight cough sounded. Freddie turned sharply. A maid in a soiled cap, worn coquettishly over one ear, was gazing intently up through the railings. Their eyes met. Freddie turned a warm pink. It seemed to him that the maid had the air of one about to giggle.

"Damn!" said Freddie softly, and hurried off down the street. He wondered whether he had made a frightful ass of himself, spraying bank-notes all over the place like that to comparative strangers. Then a vision came to him of Nelly's eyes as they had looked at him in the lamp-light, and he decided--no, absolutely not. Rummy as the gadget might appear, it had been the right thing to do. It was a binge of which he thoroughly approved. A good egg!

II

Jill, when Freddie and Nelly left the room, had seated herself on a low stool, and sat looking thoughtfully into the fire. She was wondering if she had been mistaken in supposing that Uncle Chris was worried about something. This restlessness of his, this desire for movement, was strange in him. Hitherto he had been like a dear old

cosy cat, revelling in the comfort which he had just denounced so eloquently. She watched him as he took up his favourite stand in front of the fire.

"Nice girl," said Uncle Chris. "Who was she?"

"Somebody Freddie met," said Jill diplomatically. There was no need to worry Uncle Chris with details of the afternoon's happenings.

"Very nice girl." Uncle Chris took out his cigar-case. "No need to ask if I may, thank goodness." He lit a cigar. "Do you remember, Jill, years ago, when you were quite small, how I used to blow smoke in your face?"

Jill smiled.

"Of course I do. You said that you were training me for marriage. You said that there were no happy marriages except where the wife didn't mind the smell of tobacco. Well, it's lucky, as a matter of fact, for Derek smokes all the time."

Uncle Chris took up his favourite stand against the fireplace.

"You're very fond of Derek, aren't you, Jill?"

"Of course I am. You are, too, aren't you?"

"Fine chap. Very fine chap. Plenty of money, too. It's a great relief," said Uncle Chris, puffing vigorously. "A thundering relief." He looked over Jill's head down the room. "It's fine to think of you happily married, dear, with everything in the world that you want."

Uncle Chris' gaze wandered down to where Jill sat. A slight mist affected his eyesight. Jill had provided a solution for the great problem of his life. Marriage had always appalled him, but there was this to be said for it, that married people had daughters. He had always wanted a daughter, a smart girl he could take out and be proud of; and fate had given him Jill at precisely the right age. A child would have bored Uncle Chris--he was fond of children, but they made the deuce of a noise and regarded jam as an external ornament--but a delightful little girl of fourteen was different. Jill and he had been very close to each other since her mother had died, a year after the death of her father, and had left her in his charge. He had watched her grow up with a joy that had a touch of bewilderment in it--she seemed to grow so quickly--and had been fonder and prouder of her at every stage of her tumultuous career.

"You're a dear," said Jill. She stroked the trouser-leg that was nearest. "How do you manage to get such a wonderful crease? You really are a credit to me!"

There was a momentary silence. A shade of embarrassment made itself

noticeable in Uncle Chris' frank gaze. He gave a little cough, and pulled at his moustache.

"I wish I were, my dear," he said soberly. "I wish I were. I'm afraid I'm a poor sort of a fellow, Jill."

Jill looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"A poor sort of a fellow," repeated Uncle Chris. "Your mother was foolish to trust you to me. Your father had more sense. He always said I was a wrong 'un."

Jill got up quickly. She was certain now that she had been right, and that there was something on her uncle's mind.

"What's the matter, Uncle Chris? Something's happened. What is it?"

Uncle Chris turned to knock the ash off his cigar. The movement gave him time to collect himself for what lay before him. He had one of those rare volatile natures which can ignore the blows of fate so long as their effects are not brought home by visible evidence of disaster. He lived in the moment, and, though matters had been as bad at breakfast-time as they were now, it was not till now, when he confronted Jill, that he had found his cheerfulness affected by them.

He was a man who hated ordeals, and one faced him now. Until this moment he had been able to detach his mind from a state of affairs which would have weighed unceasingly upon another man. His mind was a telephone which he could cut off at will, when the voice of Trouble wished to speak. The time would arrive, he had been aware, when he would have to pay attention to that voice, but so far he had refused to listen. Now it could be evaded no longer.

"Jill."

"Yes?"

Uncle Chris paused again, searching for the best means of saying what had to be said.

"Jill, I don't know if you understand about these things, but there was what is called a slump on the Stock Exchange this morning. In other words...."

Jill laughed.

"Of course I know all about that," she said. "Poor Freddie wouldn't talk about anything else till I made him. He was terribly blue when he got here this afternoon. He said he had got 'nipped' in Amalgamated Dyes. He had lost about two hundred pounds, and was furious with a friend of his who had told him to buy margins."

Uncle Chris cleared his throat.

"Jill, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you. I bought Amalgamated Dyes, too." He worried his moustache. "I lost heavily, very heavily."

"How naughty of you! You know you oughtn't to gamble."

"Jill, you must be brave. I--I--well, the fact is--it's no good beating about the bush--I lost everything! Everything!"

"Everything?"

"Everything! It's all gone! All fooled away. It's a terrible business. This house will have to go."

"But--but doesn't the house belong to me?"

"I was your trustee, dear." Uncle Chris smoked furiously. "Thank heaven you're going to marry a rich man!"

Jill stood looking at him, perplexed. Money, as money, had never entered into her life. There were things one wanted which had to be paid for with money, but Uncle Chris had always looked after that. She had taken them for granted.

"I don't understand," she said.

And then suddenly she realized that she did, and a great wave of pity for Uncle Chris flooded over her. He was such an old dear. It must be horrible for him to have to stand there, telling her all this. She felt no sense of injury, only the discomfort of having to witness the humiliation of her oldest friend. Uncle Chris was bound up inextricably with everything in her life that was pleasant. She could remember him, looking exactly the same, only with a thicker and wavier crop of hair, playing with her patiently and unwearied for hours in the hot sun, a cheerful martyr. She could remember sitting up with him when she came home from her first grownup dance, drinking cocoa and talking and talking and talking till the birds outside sang the sun high up into the sky and it was breakfast time. She could remember theatres with him, and jolly little suppers afterwards; expeditions into the country, with lunches at queer old inns; days on the river, days at Hurlingham, days at Lords', days at the Academy. He had always been the same, always cheerful, always kind. He was Uncle Chris, and he would always be Uncle Chris, whatever he had done or whatever he might do. She slipped her arm in his and gave it a squeeze.

"Poor old thing!" she said.

Uncle Chris had been looking straight out before him with those fine blue eyes of his. There had been just a touch of sternness in his attitude. A stranger, coming into the room at that moment, would have

said that here was a girl trying to coax her blunt, straightforward, military father into some course of action of which his honest nature disapproved. He might have been posing for a statue of Rectitude. As Jill spoke, he seemed to cave in.

"Poor old thing?" he repeated limply.

"Of course you are! And stop trying to look dignified and tragic! Because it doesn't suit you. You're much too well dressed."

"But, my dear, you don't understand! You haven't realized!"

"Yes, I do. Yes, I have!"

"I've spent all your money--your money!"

"I know! What does it matter?"

"What does it matter! Jill, don't you hate me?"

"As if anyone could hate an old darling like you!"

Uncle Chris threw away his cigar, and put his arms round Jill. For a moment a dreadful fear came to her that he was going to cry. She prayed that he wouldn't cry. It would be too awful. It would be a memory of which she could never rid herself. She felt as though he

were someone extraordinarily young and unable to look after himself, someone she must soothe and protect.

"Jill," said Uncle Chris, choking, "you're--you're--you're a little warrior!"

Jill kissed him and moved away. She busied herself with some flowers, her back turned. The tension had been relieved, and she wanted to give him time to recover his poise. She knew him well enough to be sure that, sooner or later, the resiliency of his nature would assert itself. He could never remain long in the depths.

The silence had the effect of making her think more clearly than in the first rush of pity she had been able to do. She was able now to review the matter as it affected herself. It had not been easy to grasp, the blunt fact that she was penniless, that all this comfort which surrounded her was no longer her own. For an instant a kind of panic seized her. There was a bleakness about the situation which made one gasp. It was like icy water dashed in the face. Realization had almost the physical pain of life returning to a numbed limb. Her hands shook as she arranged the flowers, and she had to bite her lip to keep herself from crying out.

She fought panic eye to eye, and beat it down. Uncle Chris, swiftly recovering by the fireplace, never knew that the fight had taken place. He was feeling quite jovial again now that the unpleasant

business of breaking the news was over, and was looking on the world with the eye of a debonair gentleman-adventurer. As far as he was concerned, he told himself, this was the best thing that could have happened. He had been growing old and sluggish in prosperity. He needed a fillip. The wits by which he had once lived so merrily had been getting blunt in their easy retirement. He welcomed the opportunity of matching them once more against the world. He was remorseful as regarded Jill, but the optimist in him, never crushed for long, told him that Jill would be all right. She would step from the sinking ship to the safe refuge of Derek Underhill's wealth and position, while he went out to seek a new life. Uncle Chris' blue eyes gleamed with a new fire as he pictured himself in this new life. He felt like a hunter setting out on a hunting expedition. There were always adventures and the spoils of war for the man with brains to find them and gather them in. But it was a mercy that Jill had Derek....

Jill was thinking of Derek, too. Panic had fled, and a curious exhilaration had seized upon her. If Derek wanted her now, it would be because his love was the strongest thing in the world. She would come to him like the beggar-maid to Cophetua.

Uncle Chris broke the silence with a cough. At the sound of it, Jill smiled again. She knew it for what it was, a sign that he was himself again.

"Tell me, Uncle Chris," she said, "just how bad is it? When you said everything was gone, did you really mean everything, or were you being melodramatic? Exactly how do we stand?"

"It's dashed hard to say, my dear. I expect we shall find there are a few hundreds left. Enough to see you through till you get married. After that it won't matter." Uncle Chris flicked a particle of dust off his coat-sleeve. Jill could not help feeling that the action was symbolical of his attitude towards life. He nicked away life's problems with just the same airy carelessness. "You mustn't worry about me, my dear. I shall be all right. I have made my way in the world before, and I can do it again. I shall go to America and try my luck there. Amazing how many opportunities there are in America. Really, as far as I am concerned, this is the best thing that could have happened. I have been getting abominably lazy. If I had gone on living my present life for another year or two, why, dash it, I honestly believe I should have succumbed to some sort of senile decay. Positively I should have got fatty degeneration of the brain! This will be the making of me."

Jill sat down on the lounge and laughed till there were tears in her eyes. Uncle Chris might be responsible for this disaster, but he was certainly making it endurable. However greatly he might be deserving of censure, from the standpoint of the sterner morality, he made amends. If he brought the whole world crashing in chaos about one's ears, at least he helped one to smile among the ruins.

"Did you ever read 'Candide,' Uncle Chris?"

"'Candide'?" Uncle Chris shook his head. He was not a great reader, except of the sporting press.

"It's a book by Voltaire. There's a character in it called Doctor Pangloss, who thought that everything was for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

Uncle Chris felt a touch of embarrassment. It occurred to him that he had been betrayed by his mercurial temperament into an attitude which, considering the circumstances, was perhaps a trifle too jubilant. He gave his moustache a pull, and reverted to the minor key.

"Oh, you mustn't think that I don't appreciate the terrible, the criminal thing I have done! I blame myself," said Uncle Chris cordially, nicking another speck of dust off his sleeve. "I blame myself bitterly. Your mother ought never to have made me your trustee, my dear. But she always believed in me, in spite of everything, and this is how I have repaid her." He blew his nose to cover a not unmanly emotion. "I wasn't fitted for the position. Never become a trustee, Jill. It's the devil, is trust money. However much you argue with yourself, you can't--dash it, you simply can't believe that it's not your own, to do as you like with, There it sits, smiling at you, crying 'Spend me! Spend me!' and you find yourself dipping--dipping--till one day there's nothing left to dip

for--only a far-off rustling--the ghosts Of dead bank-notes. That's how it was with me. The process was almost automatic. I hardly knew it was going on. Here a little--there a little. It was like snow melting on a mountain-top. And one morning--all gone!" Uncle Chris drove the point home with a gesture. "I did what I could. When I found that there were only a few hundreds left, for your sake I took a chance. All heart and no head! There you have Christopher Selby in a nutshell! A man at the club, a fool named--I've forgotten his damn name--recommended Amalgamated Dyestuffs as a speculation. Monroe, that was his name, Jimmy Monroe. He talked about the future of British Dyes now that Germany was out of the race, and ... well, the long and short of it was that I took his advice and bought on margin. Bought like the devil. And this morning Amalgamated Dyestuffs went all to blazes. There you have the whole story!"

"And now," said Jill, "comes the sequel!"

"The sequel?" said Uncle Chris breezily. "Happiness, my dear, happiness! Wedding bells and--and all that sort of thing!" He straddled the hearth-rug manfully, and swelled his chest out. He would permit no pessimism on this occasion of rejoicing. "You don't suppose that the fact of your having lost your money--that is to say--er--of my having lost your money--will affect a splendid young fellow like Derek Underhill? I know him better than to think that! I've always liked him. He's a man you can trust! Besides," he added reflectively, "there's no need to tell him! Till after the wedding, I mean. It won't be hard to keep up appearances here for a month or so."

"Of course we must tell him!"

"You think it wise?"

"I don't know about it being wise. It's the only thing to do. I must see him to-night. Oh, I forgot. He was going away this afternoon for a day or two."

"Capital! It will give you time to think it over."

"I don't want to think it over. There's nothing to think about."

"Of course, yes, of course. Quite so."

"I shall write him a letter."

"Write, eh?"

"It's easier to put what one wants to say in a letter."

"Letters," began Uncle Chris, and stopped as the door opened. Jane, the parlourmaid, entered, carrying a salver.

"For me?" asked Uncle Chris.

"For Miss Jill, sir."

Jill took the note off the salver.

"It's from Derek."

"There's a messenger-boy waiting, miss," said Jane. "He wasn't told if there was an answer."

"If the note is from Derek," said Uncle Chris, "it's not likely to want an answer. You said he left town to-day."

Jill opened the envelope.

"Is there an answer, miss?" asked Jane, after what she considered a suitable interval. She spoke tenderly. She was a great admirer of Derek, and considered it a pretty action on his part to send notes like this when he was compelled to leave London.

"Any answer, Jill?"

Jill seemed to rouse herself. She had turned oddly pale.

"No, no answer, Jane."

"Thank you, miss," said Jane, and went off to tell the cook that in

her opinion Jill was lacking in heart. "It might have been a bill instead of a love-letter," said Jane to the cook with indignation, "the way she read it. I like people to have a little feeling!"

Jill sat turning the letter over and over in her fingers. Her face was very white. There seemed to be a big, heavy, leaden something inside her. A cold hand clutched her throat. Uncle Chris, who at first had noticed nothing untoward, now began to find the silence sinister.

"No bad news, I hope, dear?"

Jill turned the letter between her fingers.

"Jill, is it bad news?"

"Derek has broken off the engagement," said Jill in a dull voice. She let the note fall to the floor, and sat with her chin in her hands.

"What!" Uncle Chris leaped from the hearth-rug, as though the fire had suddenly scorched him. "What did you say?"

"He's broken it off."

"The hound!" cried Uncle Chris. "The blackguard! The--the--I never liked that man! I never trusted him!" He fumed for a moment. "But--but--it isn't possible. How can he have heard about what's

happened? He couldn't know. It's--it's--it isn't possible!"

"He doesn't know. It has nothing to do with that."

"But...." Uncle Chris stooped to where the note lay. "May I...?"

"Yes, you can read it if you like."

Uncle Chris produced a pair of reading-glasses, and glared through them at the sheet of paper as though it were some loathsome insect.

"The hound! The cad! If I were a younger man," shouted Uncle Chris, smiting the letter violently, "if I were.... Jill! My dear little Jill!"

He plunged down on his knees beside her, as she buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

"My little girl! Damn that man! My dear little girl! The cad! The devil! My own darling little girl! I'll thrash him within an inch of his life!"

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away the minutes. Jill got up. Her face was wet and quivering, but her mouth had set in a brave line.

"Jill, dear!"

She let his hand close over hers.

"Everything's happening all at once this afternoon, Uncle Chris, isn't it!" She smiled a twisted smile. "You look so funny! Your hair's all rumpled, and your glasses are over on one side!"

Uncle Chris breathed heavily through his nose.

"When I meet that man...." he began portentously.

"Oh, what's the good of bothering! It's not worth it! Nothing's worth it!" Jill stopped and faced him, her hands clenched. "Let's get away! Let's get right away! I want to get right away, Uncle Chris! Take me away! Anywhere! Take me to America with you! I must get away!"

Uncle Chris raised his right hand, and shook it. His reading-glasses, hanging from his left ear, bobbed drunkenly.

"We'll sail by the next boat! The very next boat, dammit! I'll take care of you, dear. I've been a blackguard to you, my little girl. I've robbed you, and swindled you. But I'll make up for it, by George! I'll make up for it! I'll give you a new home, as good as this, if I die for it. There's nothing I won't do! Nothing! By Jove!" shouted Uncle Chris, raising his voice in a red-hot frenzy of emotion, "I'll work! Yes, by Gad, if it comes right down to it, I'll work!"

He brought his fist down with a crash on the table where Derek's flowers stood in their bowl. The bowl leaped in the air and tumbled over, scattering the flowers on the floor.